

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

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THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY RUTLAND FIRE CLAY



Rutland Fire Clay Co.

RUTLAND FIRE CLAY CRUDE AND GROUND
SUPERIOR GROUND CLAY.
FOR SETTING BOILERS AND GAS HOUSE WORK.
CUPOLA CEMENT FOR FURNACES.
RUTLAND STOVE LINING.

Miners, Dealers
AND Manufacturers.

RUTLAND, VT.

Rutland Fire Clay Company
By Dawn D. Hance *

The metal drum with the red and green checkered design emblazoned with the words Rutland Fire Clay is a nationally recognized trademark. Although the firm no longer maintains manufacturing operations in Rutland, it carries the original name under which it was founded 100 years ago this year. That the company has survived for a century is due mainly to the perseverance, willingness to diversify and the ingenuity of the Perkins family.

In the mid-1860s Rufus Lyman Perkins (he was always called Lyman by his friends in East Middlebury and his family to differentiate him from his father, Rufus) moved from East Middlebury, where he made barrel staves, to Rutland. He and two of his daughters opened a small bakery on Main Street.

In the meantime, Rufus became acquainted with Plimington Daggett, who joined his quest for minerals. The two scoured the hillsides around Rutland hoping to discover mineral deposits, especially those rich in iron ore. While exploring in Mendon, the men found magnesite, but, unfortunately, it contained a small amount of manganese which, when burned, turned brown instead of the desired white. Rufus's son Arthur recalled that once his father heated some mineral in the coal stove and made a white button from the substance. Supposedly, this mineral was excavated from a bank on the Elbow Road in Sherburne where it descends towards Pittsfield.

Tradition maintains that Rufus used red clay from a nearby brook to build a furnace to melt the iron ore found on Mr. Spellman's farm in Mendon. This "fire clay" was taken from the Gould farm on which Rufus had leased certain rights on August 9, 1872. Although the iron industry never amounted to much, the clay was used for over three quarters of a century.

On September 9, 1873, the **Rutland Herald** printed the following article:

We learn since publication of an article in regard to the opening of an iron mine by Mr. Spellman in Mendon, that Mr. R. L. Perkins of this village, has made some valuable discoveries in the vicinity of Spellman's farm on the farm of Mrs. Gould, about 100 rods from Spellman's.

In prospecting he put a drift into the hill or mountain, about sixty-five feet, and found what is said to be a paint bed of superior quality. We learn that the paint has been used by C. F. Richardson and Philip Edgerton and others of Rutland, Mr. Edgerton painting his entire house, including the blinds.

Mr. Perkins also put down a shaft about twenty-five feet, finding large quantities of hematite (sic) iron ore. The quality improves the lower he goes into the bed. At this time he has, he states, a vein of over five feet in thickness at the bottom of the shaft.

The Gould farm was located in the southeastern section of Rutland in a valley between Bald Mountain and East Mountain at the end of Perkins Road. The nearby stream is still referred to as Paint Mine Brook.

Rufus's daughter Inez at the age of 21 purchased two and one half acres of the farm from Laura Gould for \$100 in 1874. This piece of land provided the red clay for Rufus's products.

In August, 1874, Rufus placed the following advertisement in the **Rutland Herald**.

I would inform the inhabitants of Rutland and vicinity that I have fitted up a store,

No. 12 Wales St.

and commenced the selling of a general assortment of groceries and provisions on commission at the lowest prices for cash.

Also sell the Rutland Fire Clay (a superior article) and the Fireproof Dry Ground Paint for outside work. Very Cheap.

R. L. Perkins

No doubt, for a time his business flourished, since he built the small brick block on Wales Street between the Rutland Herald building and the former site of the



BOARDING HOUSE

Beechwood, the Perkins home, also referred to as the Boarding House. Usually there were 20-35 people fed at each meal.

Berwick Hotel. He moved his grocery store to this location and the family resided in the apartment above it. However, Rufus could not keep up with the mortgage payments and lost the brick block. At that time his son Charles went into the grocery business and Rufus helped him out for awhile.

Like other buildings of the day, the Perkins Grocery Store was heated by a stove. When the insulating bricks lining the stove interior (firebox) became worn, Rufus patched them with his fire clay. The heat caused the clay to harden and permanently fill the cracks. One day a salesman happened to open the stove door and asked about the patching material, which he proposed to sell. Thus, the Rutland Stove Lining, "Fits any stove cheap", was born.

Rufus's youngest son Arthur, who at one time entertained thoughts of going west and becoming a station agent, became interested in his father's clay business and bought the remaining 25 acres of the Gould farm from the Cheneys. He paid \$1,000 for the 25 acres.

Perhaps Arthur and the others were envisioning large sales of the red clay or were protecting the clay business from the grocery creditors. Whatever their motives, they decided to organize into a company. In April, 1883, the Rutland Fire Clay Company was formed. The next year the shares were divided. Arthur Perkins deeded his part of the Gould farm to the fledgling company for 599 shares, and his sister Inez deeded her portion for 100 shares. Rufus quit-claimed his buildings and machinery for 300 shares, and Charles received one share. In 1885 the stock was finally issued, with one minor exception. Inez received only 99 shares, and Rufus's sister, Mrs. Carolyn Boardman, was awarded the other share. Soon after, Arthur signed over 300 shares of his stock to his mother, Olive. Rufus Perkins became president of the company, while Charles served as secretary and Arthur as treasurer. From this time forward Arthur was the driving force in the company. For the next 15 years the family lived off the farm and drew only small salaries.

* Dawn Hance is a contributor to the *Quarterly* and is the author of *Shrewsbury, Vermont: Our Town As It Was*.

In the early 1880s the family decided to build a house on the property to be near the base of operations. The cellar hole was dug by Arthur Perkins and his brother-in-law, John C. Fisher, and built by Louis LaFerriere, who was a "rule of thumb" carpenter. He could barely read or write, but, according to Arthur's daughter, Amy L. Perkins, "He could build things that stood up and lasted, served their purpose and looked quite well as a whole". LaFerriere did most all of the building around the mill site. The house originally was a box-like building with steep stairs and a central hall. It was painted red, no doubt with fire clay paint. During the next decade a shop was added on the flat south of the house, and the office stood behind the house. Arthur and his wife moved into the new home where they were later joined by Rufus, his wife and son Charles.

Working with the clay was a messy job, and the men often returned home caked with the red mud. Once, when Rufus appeared unusually dirty, his wife Olive piped up, "Lyman, you're hardly worth cleaning!"

Eventually, the company added more holdings — most of the Spellman farm to the north and the deserted Wardwell farm to the west. The latter was used as a boarding house. At one time, the company employed some emigrants from the Hungarian-Serbian area, and Frank Howard (Hovarth) acted as interpreter. After the job was completed, they moved on, several settling in Proctor.

During the 1890s the supply of red clay began to dwindle, and a shaft was sunk into the bank south of the brook, where underground operations were carried on that winter. The frost in the ground held up the roof, and the diggings caved in one day after the workers ceased operations. This new source yielded clay for another 10 or 12 years.

In 1898, at the age of 82, Rufus Perkins died. Before his death Olive transferred her 300 shares back to Arthur. This may have been compensation for caring for Rufus and Olive in their declining years. At the same time, Inez and Mrs. Boardman sold out to Charles Perkins. This settlement left Arthur with 680 shares of stock and Charles with 320.

When the Rutland Railroad went bankrupt in the 1890s, P. W. Clement acquired interest in the defunct system. His brother Wallace borrowed \$15,000 in 1900 to buy 300 shares of Rutland Fire Clay. At this time the company commenced selling coal to consumers and the railroad company. The coal yard was located on Allen Street next to the railroad tracks and the office on Merchants Row. This venture lasted only a few years until Clement sold his stock in the railroad.

In December, 1902, the Rutland Fire Clay factory burned to the ground. The fire started in the shop where boxes were piled next to the stovepipe. The company was insured and soon leased the vacant Chase Toy Works located on Curtis Avenue. The buildings, which were constructed for the toy company, consisted of a two story building, mill construction and a plant with brick engine and boiler room. Later, the company bought the property. A few years later Arthur convinced the city to continue Curtis Avenue from Mussey Street to Stratton Road, reducing the distance between the new plant and the mine on the Gould farm.

Since the new plant had plenty of room for expansion, a new product was added. Gypsum plaster was quickly replacing the old sand and lime plaster, but Arthur, after much experimentation, introduced an asbestos wall plaster. Later, it was packaged in five and ten pound bags to be sold for patching.

The panic of 1907 brought the building industry to a halt, and the need for plaster was greatly reduced. The company had many debts and few liquid assets, so it took out a \$10,000 loan to see it through to better times.

While Arthur was visiting a plant in Maryland, fire struck the Curtis Avenue plant on June 9, 1910. The Rutland Herald printed the following:

Just an hour after the sounding of the alarm at 10:30 o'clock, the big wooden structure, valued at about \$25,000 and filled with stock and machinery enough to bring the total loss to about \$50,000, was a mass of smoldering ruins. When the firemen from station No. 1 arrived at the scene, the blaze was confined in the northeast corner of the building, but at this time the flames were spreading rapidly and the two streams which were at once brought into play proved to have little effect on the fire which resembled a roaring furnace.



This picture is probably the first taken of Rutland Fire Clay employees. Left to right, front row: Arthur W. Perkins, Amy Perkins, Rufus L. Perkins, Henry Taylor, Charles McKean and Charles F. Perkins; back row: Peter Bedore, Brian McKean and his son, John McKean.



Rutland Fire Clay plant circa 1893. This building burned.



Hallard Barker and foreman, Nelson Washburn, are standing at the south pit-head.



After the plant burned, the company moved into the Chase Toy Works on Curtis Avenue pictured above. The larger building was destroyed by fire in 1913.

It is not known just how the fire started, but it is supposed to be the work of tramps.

The fire was an extremely hot one and the firemen were forced to turn the streams on themselves to keep from burning.

Albert Rousseau discovered the fire. He had been to the band concert and went past the building at 10 o'clock. At that time everything was all right and there was no sign of fire anywhere.

Mr. Rousseau went to his home and looked after his horse, and when he came out about 20 minutes later he noticed a blaze in a "lean-to" at the southeastern end of the main factory.

The fire was a magnificent one from the spectacular standpoint. Inky black skies made a sombre background for the livid flames leaping high into the air, as the dried timbers of the old structure fed them, and the showers of sparks mingling with heavy black smoke made a brilliant spectacle . . .

Arthur planned to do what he could to prevent another disastrous fire. He consulted with M. C. Tuttle, who designed the first of the company's concrete buildings. This building, as well as the later ones, were constructed by Bert Bissell, a successful contractor from Shrewsbury. He later returned to the company for several years as plant superintendent.

Through the years, the company has changed with the times. During the early years it concentrated mostly on stove products — stove lining, Black Imp water stove polish and Big Box gasoline polish. The latter two were made in the "soup house", a small building across the brook from the factory on the Gould farm. As the August sun blazed through the windows it shone upon the open gasoline cans. Charles and Bill Foster, who were in the building at the time, made a dive for safety. One went through the window and the other through the door to escape the flames which destroyed the building.

Most of the products met with success, but in 1890 Arthur Perkins introduced Plantene, a food for house plants. However, after years of promotion and disappointingly low sales, it was dropped in the early 1900s. It was simply ahead of its time.

When the wood and coal stoves were replaced with central heating and there was no longer a demand for stove products, many firms folded. However, Rutland Fire Clay diversified into other areas. About 1902 it commenced the manufacture of plaster; during World War I, when everyone was encouraged to save eggs, they made water glass. A pint of water glass will preserve eight dozen eggs. Since the 1920s, the company's main line has been building supplies such as furnace cement, roofing, caulking and glazing compounds, paints and removers.

Arthur Perkins, the backbone of the company for many years, was an advertising genius. His catchy slogans, color schemes and thought-provoking pictures greatly enhanced the sale of his products. Arthur was the mayor of Rutland from 1927 to 1934. During his terms, the municipal swimming pool, which formerly stood on North Main Street, was constructed at a cost of \$30,000. In 1935 Arthur Perkins died and was succeeded by his son, Cleon. He retired in 1956, at which time his son Donald A., who is still chief executive, became president of the company.

In 1952 a plant in Jacksonville, Illinois, was set up as a warehouse. The plant in Rutland ceased manufacturing operations in 1978. Today, Rutland Fire Clay manufactures all of its products at Jacksonville and at its other plant located in Gastonia, North Carolina. The corporate offices until recently were still maintained on Curtis Avenue in Rutland. The company decided to return the offices to the site of the first plant at the end of Perkins Road. They are located at Beechwood, the house that was built in the 1880s. No doubt old Rufus would approve of the change.

The Perkins Family* **By Dawn D. Hance**

For over a century the names Rutland Fire Clay and the Perkins family have been synonymous. A history of the company without mention of the family who founded and nurtured it would be only a half-told tale.

The Perkins line in America commenced with emigrant John Perkins, who with fellow passenger the Reverend Roger Williams, set sail from England on the "Lyon". Subsequent generations made their way to Vermont. Rufus Lyman Perkins was born November 15, 1816, at East Middlebury, the son of Rufus and Sylvia (Tupper) Perkins. His mother was a "roaring" Methodist and at times made her children pray in dark closets. As a result, Rufus came to resent religion and refused to marry in a church. In 1842 he and his bride, Olive Norton Smith, were wed at Ripton by a justice of the peace. After the marriage his mother greeted her new daughter-in-law with, "You are a good girl, Olive, but I never expected to have a Universalist enter my house!"

Rufus engaged in various pursuits, eventually settling into the sawmill and woodworking business. Sometime between 1855 and 1860 he lost his left hand, which was severed by a power saw at the mill. His daughter Inez, awaiting his return, announced to her mother, "Here comes father now, and he is bringing a piece of meat." Times were hard for the family after the accident.

To complicate things, his sons Henry and Charles ran off to Rutland to enlist in the Civil War, but Rufus was right behind them and retrieved Charles, who was under age. Henry went to war and lost a leg in the engagement of Spanish Fort.

Rufus was having a difficult time supporting his family of eight children and decided to try his luck in Rutland. In 1863-1864 he liquidated all of his assets in Middlebury and made the move. Rufus, accompanied by his daughters Ida and Iola, rented rooms which included a shop near the corner of Main and West Streets. Here they set up a small bakery, where they sold homemade pies and cakes from their showcase. After he was settled, the rest of the family joined him.

In 1874 Rufus opened a grocery store just north of the site of the Berwick Hotel. Later, he built the brick block north of this location, where he had a large grocery and lived in the apartment above. At one time when one of the rooms needed redecorating, he hired a roving Greek or Italian artist who painted attractive scenes on the walls.

The grocery business did not hold Rufus's attention for very long. He spent time prospecting, digging out his red clay and going to seances held at a house on the east side of East Street. As a result, his business suffered, and he lost his little brick block.

At this time the family moved into the Hawley house, and Charles opened up a grocery at the northeast corner of Center and Wales Streets. Rufus helped at the store. Supposedly, the Hawley house, which stood just north of the store, was haunted. Flat irons flew off the stove, a strange woman appeared and footsteps and closing doors were heard by family members. Olive was afraid to be there alone, although she was thought to be somewhat psychic herself. During the Civil War she often became restless, saying she knew that there had been a battle. When her son Henry was wounded, she knew something had happened to him, but later she said he is all right now. Henry lay wounded at Fort Baracas several hours before being rescued by Rodney Lawrence of Hubbardton. Every summer that Henry came home he visited his fellow soldier.

After a few years spent at the Hawley house and running the store, enough money had been made to warrant a move to the mine site. Rufus's son Arthur took over the financial affairs and built a house there in the early 1880s. He and his wife spent their first winter in the house, which was not yet plastered. Later Charles, Rufus and Olive also moved to the house, which was known as Beechwood.

The family worked hard and went without until the company started to profit. An Irish lady named Mrs. Dugan presented them with a hen and a setting of eggs,

*The account of the Perkins family depicts incidents in the lives of family members which may seem unusual in 1983 but which were not unusual in the lives of Americans living in the late 1800s and early 1900s.



Rufus Lyman Perkins standing in front of the first plant in 1883.



the start of their flock. Arthur bought an old sleigh from Fred Chaffee for two dollars and replaced the tattered upholstery with grain sacks stuffed with straw. At Christmas Arthur gave his wife a buffalo robe, and they felt quite smart riding to town.

As the business grew, so did the household, which kept the women pretty busy. There were usually 15 to 20 workers to feed, plus a large family. Arthur's son Cleon recalled that for breakfast they had hot cereal or hard boiled eggs and toast and always coffee and doughnuts.

Sunday was ushered in with pancakes and maple syrup and, beginning in 1910, fresh oranges. Dinner was eaten at noon, and supper, which usually consisted of leftover meat, fried potatoes or milk toast, was eaten at night. Monday's dinner was boiled dinner, Tuesday's salt pork and milk gravy, Thursday's pot roast and brown gravy, Friday's fish and Saturday's baked beans and brown bread. Saturday was bake day, and the oven turned out pies, cookies, cakes, bread, johnny-cake and biscuits. During the summer months they also picked strawberries, raspberries and blackberries. One bountiful day a total of 74 quarts of blackberries were harvested. Some of these went into pies or were canned and preserved, while the rest were sold. One notorious customer was a madame who lived on the bank of Eddy Ice Pond. When Cleon took the berries to her, his mother always saw to it that his sister Amy went along. His mother may have thought that the madame was "fishing for minnows".

Of course there was always a lot of work to be done, and the children must help. One group activity was the "fly shoo". The house windows and doors were all screened and fly paper hung at strategic spots, but, try as they might, they could not keep the thousands of flies from invading. So the women would grab their aprons and the children a cloth and shoo the flies to the kitchen. At this point the doors were opened, and the flies beat a hasty retreat.

The children born to Rufus and Olive numbered eight — four boys and four girls. As has been said, Henry lost a leg in the Civil War and was on crutches for life. While in Kansas, he corresponded with Annie Harper, a girl living in England. Anxious to be with him, she ran away from home, came to the United States and made it all the way to Kansas on her own. The story goes that Henry walked around the railroad station several times wondering what to do. At length, he decided to marry her. Henry landed a post in the Pension Office at Washington, D.C. He lived to be 91 years old.

Charles, who married rather late in life, for years acted as company foreman. He was a quiet fellow and lived at the mine until his marriage, when he moved to South Main Street. He had an old horse named Kitty, whom he treated very kindly. Often he was seen driving his carriage, sitting very straight and proper on the edge of the front seat, holding the reins very high. The whip always stayed in its socket! The older Kitty became, the slower her pace. While Arthur's children were confined with the measles, they composed a poem about the horse, which began:

Step along, Kitty, come step along!

I know you are old and the way it is long,

But really, you know, we must get there sometime,

And the road it is good and the weather is fine.

Ida, a successful seamstress and milliner, married Charles W. Sager of Castleton in 1869. Charles wanted to go west, but he was persuaded to stay in Vermont and landed a job making cabinets for the Estey Organ Company in Brattleboro. After awhile the company shut down, and he was without employment. At this point in their lives they decided to go west. Thus, in 1873 they arrived in what is now LaGrace, South Dakota. Ida, living away from friends and family in a remote sod house, became despondent. While her husband was away, she safely tucked her daughter Edith away in some straw, tied her own hands behind her back and dived into the rain water barrel. Her husband kept Edith until her early teens, when she went to live with her mother's sister Inez.

Iola had a millinery and seamstress shop in Putney, where she married Chandler Puffer in 1870. She had a happy life, but, shortly before she was 50, she developed an unknown illness. She died during an emergency operation in New York.

Eddice, who was always called the "pretty one", had a fair, rosy complexion, curly auburn hair and dark eyes. She married her first cousin, Edwin Clarence Perkins, against her parents's better judgement and during the next year bore a daughter, Josie. However, Eddice died from convulsions during childbirth. Macabre circumstances followed her death. Color remained in her cheeks and lips, and her skin appeared normal. The family could not accept her death, and could not bring themselves to bury her. Instead, the casket was placed in the cemetery vault, and Inez and Charles visited everyday, holding a mirror to her lips to see if she was breathing. They took her home, but eventually they realized she was gone, and they buried her. Unfortunately, there was still no peace for Eddice! One night her husband sneaked into the graveyard, exhumed her body and reburied it in Brattleboro, unbeknownst to the family.

Inez, familiarly referred to as Nan, was an expert seamstress and milliner. She married John Fisher. Aunt Nan was a kind-hearted soul and was always willing to help one in need. She and John cared for her sister Ida's daughter, Edith, but they never had any children of their own.

George, his mother's favorite, was bright but a bit of a scamp and never amounted to much. One stormy night in Providence, Rhode Island, he was struck and killed by a car.

Arthur Worden, the youngest of the family, was born in 1861. His middle name was the surname of the commander of the "Monitor", the ironclad of the famed Civil War battle. His marketing skills and advertising genius were responsible for the growth of the Rutland Fire Clay Company into a nationally recognized firm. His marriage to Louise Sarah Fisher in 1883 produced six children: Amy Louise, who was company treasurer for many years, Harry Lyman and Vivian Eliza, who both died young, Cleon Arthur, who served as company president 1935-1956, Vera Alice, who is a retired school teacher living at the Perkins homestead on South Main street (this stately brick home was built in 1916 for Arthur) and Craigie Smith Perkins, who was the company chemist until his retirement in 1951. The story will not end here, for today there is another generation of Perkins descendants at the helm.

It has been said that Rufus never really succeeded in his business ventures, but neither did he quite fail. Perhaps he was a bit of a dreamer or too adventurous for the times, but the fact remains that he did discover the clay and perfect it into useful items. All he needed was a son with financial and marketing ability to put the company on its feet. He produced that too. His name was Arthur.

The Rutland Historical Society gratefully acknowledges Rutland Fire Clay's gift of pictures, advertisements, newspaper clippings, company newsletters and family reminiscences. The author sincerely appreciates the generosity of Mrs. Janet Perkins Martin, who loaned the family genealogy notebook compiled by her aunt, Miss Amy L. Perkins.



Left to right: Cleon A. Perkins, Arthur W. Perkins, Henry Latimore (painter) and Charles F. Perkins in front of the concrete plant on Curtis Avenue.

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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The Rutland Historical Society was founded in 1969 to preserve, study and disseminate the history of the original Town of Rutland as chartered by New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth in 1761, now comprised of the City of Rutland (1892) and the Towns of Rutland (1761), Proctor (1886) and West Rutland (1886). The Society maintains and operates The Rutland Museum in the historic Bank of Rutland building built in 1825, now owned by the City of Rutland, and The Vermont Farm and Rural Life Museum at the Vermont State Fair. A research library and the historical collections are maintained in the Museums and the historic Nickwackett Fire Station. Gifts or bequests of articles of historical interest or money are welcome at all times and are deductible for income tax purposes.

The Society publishes the Rutland Historical Society Quarterly for the members and presents public historical programs throughout the year at the Rutland Free Library in the Nella Grimm Fox Room.

Membership in the Society is open to all upon payment of dues to the Membership Secretary, Hope E. Hubbard, 248 Lincoln Avenue, Rutland, Vermont 05701. Membership entitles each member to a subscription to four issues each year of the Quarterly, a copy of the Annual Report, the right to vote at business meetings and the benefits of supporting the Museums, monthly programs, library and collections. Dues are \$3.00 a year for regular members and \$5.00 for a family membership; for those wishing to give the Society further support a contributing membership is \$10.00; a sponsor membership is \$25.00; a sustaining membership is \$100.00 (minimum); and a life membership (one payment only) is \$100.00. Members wishing to pay two or more years' dues in advance are encouraged to do so to reduce costs. The expiration date of each membership is listed on the mailing label of the publication. Please send change of address on Postal Service Form 3576 (a postcard available free of charge at your local post office).

Manuscripts are invited; address correspondence to the Editor.

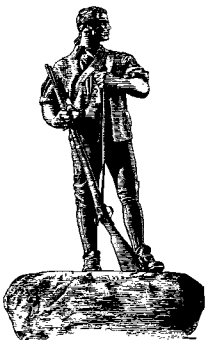
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